

## VIETNAM, THAILAND AND THE FINAL DAYS

As work progressed toward the completion of the Viet Nam Network's radio and television facilities, concurrent efforts continued to improve the program content of both radio and TV.

Following the move to the new studios, the station made several additions to the AFVN news services. The UPI "rip-n-read" radio wire replaced the old UPI press wire. For news sources, the station obtained ABC Television News film, AP radio service and the AP Library Photo Service. All this was in operation by the end of 1967.

Local news, sports, weather and command information productions accounted for eleven percent of the total schedule. Fifty-five hours a week, one-third of the total programming, carried command information subjects. These included United States and world information features. On an average, more than one hundred radio and television command information spots aired weekly. For special events, AFVN broadcast such programs as "The Bob Hope Christmas Show." The network's remote crew recorded that program on Christmas Day, 1967, on-location at Bearcat, and it was re-broadcast network wide on January 5, 1968.

### AFRTS UNDER ATTACK AGAIN

The network's existence in the midst of a war zone made it anything but typical. From the first attack on the station in December, 1964, the staff knew that they never functioned far from danger.

Almost three years to the day, on December 11, 1967, the Nha Trang television site came under mortar attack. The mess hall and NCO Club near the outlet took direct hits resulting in minor damage. The major casualty was the club TV set. The staff suffered no casualties.

On January 7, 1968, Da Nang's Red Beach radio transmitter facility sustained damage from rocket fragments. The attack severed the transmission line to the radiating towers. The engineering staff repaired it and restored complete operations within two hours.

During the Tet Offensive of 1968, AFVN Headquarters received at least six alerts that a Viet Cong ground attack was imminent and that the station was a *target*. As a result, the Network Commander completely revised the operational procedures. He created two complete 24-hour crews

to insure continuous manning and operation of the network's primary source of programming.

Such precautions couldn't, of course, prevent the attacks themselves:

### AFVN SUFFERS CASUALTIES AND WORSE

On the morning of January 31, 1968, the mess hall of the station on top of Vung Chua Mountain came under enemy fire, but sustained no damage. That night, North Vietnamese regulars, who were in control of Hue, attacked the AFVN station again with small arms and light mortar fire. The station NCOIC, Army Sergeant John Anderson, later recalled that until the Tet Offensive, the worst thing that'd happened there "was a couple of mortar attacks." He had every reason to believe he was going to get out of Viet Nam unscathed. He had a job in a secure area, he had only a month to go on his tour, and he was only six months away from retirement.

Explosions woke Anderson and his men at 2:30 in the morning. Moments later, bullets smashed through the barracks windows. The North Vietnamese had surrounded the station. No serious damage or injuries occurred initially, but the attack continued for the next five days. The staff defended itself until its supplies began to run out. By that time, a Marine sergeant had been killed and all the others had been wounded at least once. With only about 100 rounds of ammunition left and their water gone, the means to resist was fading fast.

The AFVN staff decided that their best chance for survival lay in getting to a friendly compound a mile away. They made a dash for it. Unfortunately, they ran into North Vietnamese army regulars and Viet Cong. They were captured and spent the next *five years* in North Vietnamese prisons. After he returned to the United States, Anderson remembered, "Getting captured is the last thing anyone ever thinks about. In Viet Nam, the possibility always existed, but it was so remote I never gave it any thought." (1)

Like Anderson, AFRTS staffers who served tours in Southeast Asia discovered what all soldiers quickly came to realize. The Viet Nam War was like no other conflict the United States had known.

There were no front lines.

No place was completely safe.

### THREE MORE DIE

The AFVN Headquarters found this out on May 3, 1968, when the Saigon station suffered considerable damage from a car bomb attack. A Viet Cong drove a small Renault taxi loaded with 110 pounds of TNT across an open field adjacent to the station. He detonated the explosives directly in front of the AFVN television building. The blast destroyed the front of the headquarters, killing three network employees and two others in a small Vietnamese food stand near the compound. The explosion also damaged the



exterior structure of the AFVN headquarters building. It shattered glass, split the front door, blew holes in the roof and collapsed the ceiling in offices and studios. AFRTS' typical reaction: continued operations without interruption!

AFVN civilian personnel, mostly under contract from RCA, continued to devote considerable energy to building up South Vietnam's television capacity. Their efforts reached fruition on March 15, 1968, when AFVN turned over to the Saigon government the flagship station building adjacent to the American headquarters complex. Two more facilities remained under construction while the government's Saigon station commanded the largest Vietnamese audience in the country, an instrument by which the leadership attempted to win support.

The high power (250-Kilowatt effective radiated power) station in Can Tho would follow the GVN headquarters station on the air in late Spring, 1968. However, during the Tet Offensive, the battle damaged the almost-completed station so severely it had to be completely rebuilt. It became operational on November 19, 1968.

After the Communist defeat during Tet, AFVN put emphasis on the production of its own programming. This included the establishment of a on-the-job training and cross-training program. The program offered training in the production of command information spots and increased production support of AFVN detachments in the field. To promote creativity amongst field production personnel, AFVN trainees with AFVN regulars at headquarters produced several thirty-minute TV shows. These included "Nashville Vietnam," which featured country-and-western military talent, and "Strawberry Four," which highlighted a popular local Vietnamese vocal-and-instrumental combo.

#### SPECIAL EVENT MILESTONES

AFVN Network Radio also experienced a major overhaul during '68. Music programming changed in the direction of the "mod" sound since three-quarters of the listening audience in Viet Nam was under the age of 25. The average age was 19.5 years. Presidential election coverage was extensive, using the AFNB direct line from Washington to bring major network live coverage to the war zone. They broadcast the World Series and recapped it later in the day for the benefit of those unable to hear it the first time. At the end of the year, AFVN Radio broadcast live the major bowl games and did a special countdown of the 100 top songs of '68. The Beatles sang, "Revolution," and Jose Feliciano gave a new rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner." Troops danced to Blood, Sweat & Tears and laughed at Tiny Tim, as if the music of the day reflected exactly the conflicts of the times.

The radio network broadcast live, remote broadcasts from Tan Son Nhut when Archbishop Terrance Cooke celebrated a Midnight Christmas Mass and when evangelist

Billy Graham conducted a Sunrise Service. AFVN fed them simultaneously to AFRTS Washington for rebroadcast to Armed Forces stations around the world.

AFVN didn't rest in its drive to enhance its programming. AFRTS reached an agreement with CBS-TV to provide AFVN with video tapes of the network's Evening News Program with Walter Cronkite. The LA Headquarters began shipping the show to Saigon on a daily basis on April 17, '69. AFVN News took segments from the CBS programs and integrated them into its regular television newscasts.

On the radio side, AFVN News kept the troops informed of world, national and local events with live coverage of major events and reports from the worldwide wire services. In particular, the network reported on the progress of President Nixon's eight-point peace plan. It carried his announcement at Midway that the United States was reducing its forces in Viet Nam by twenty-five thousand.

By the summer, the network had nearly reached its final form. AFVN operated seven detachments sited in secure locations across Viet Nam besides the flagship station in Saigon. Five stations broadcast both radio and TV. Two transmitted television only.

The radio network had three 50,000-watt AM transmitters, three 10,000-watt AM transmitters, a 1,000-watt AM transmitter and four FM transmitters, two of which were shortly to become FM stereo. To enhance production at the TV outlets, each in-country station received two studio cameras for live TV broadcasts.

AFVN covered all aspects of July's Apollo 11 mission. From commercial network news operations, a special jet from the Philippines flew in video tapes of the daily events of the first journey to the moon. The tech staff worked 'round-the-clock to produce duplicate copies of the tapes. Then, they immediately distributed them to each of the seven in-country television outlets. Thanks to their dedication, most of the U.S. Forces in Viet Nam followed the voyage of Apollo 11 within twenty-four hours of the world-historic event!

The first successful moon landing probably didn't draw as much attention from the troops as did two speeches by President Nixon that September discussing troop cutbacks in Vietnam. AFVN radio broadcast both speeches live and carried excerpts on television the day after. The President's initiative marked the beginning of the end of Armed Forces Radio and Television in Southeast Asia.

The network continued to improve its service throughout 1969. The Saigon station began stereo FM broadcasting on October 14. Less than a month later, Da Nang followed suit.

The same month, thousands of American troops in Vietnam were able to watch same day coverage of the splashdown of Apollo 12. An Air Force jet immediately



flew a copy of this event which received via satellite by AFPN, to the AFVN where it aired only hours after the fact.

Special event reporting continued with in-country live remotes of Bob Hope Christmas shows and coverage of distinguished visitors. The most popular American to visit the troops (with the possible exception of Hope) was "The Duke," John Wayne. He coupled selfless visits with the troops with his 1965 on-location study for the movie, "The Green Berets."

Another celebrity, and the one to whom AFVN gave the most coverage, was pretty AFRTS disc jockey Chris Noel. The Los Angeles headquarters recruited the starlet in 1966. She would do a record and talk show in the mode of G.I. Jill, AFRTS's World War II answer to Axis Sally and Tokyo Rose. On her program, "A Date With Chris," Noel played top-40 hits interspersed with words of comfort. Noel said that she took the job "because I wanted to do something for my country." Of her audience, she said, "All they had were little transistor radios to take them away from the lonely nights. For fifty-five minutes to have some softness in their lives made an incredible impact." (2)

For men who counted the days until the end of their tours, her encouragement and songs sure helped alleviate the loneliness. Yet, it was Chris Noel in person that had the most impact. In December, 1966, "A Date with Chris" went on the air. Shortly afterward, AFRTS sent Noel on the first of several visits to Vietnam. She publicized the show and performed in spots, station ID's and promo's for the in-country stations. Captain Willis Haas was Noel's escort officer. He noted in his after-action report of one 11-day visit, "Miss Noel's visit to Viet Nam was highly productive. She raised the morale of the men whom she visited and generated much good will toward AFRT-VN among the troops." (3)

"I'd talk to them and sign autographs," Chris said. "The job which they created for me in the '60s was very unique." It allowed her to use her ability as a "nurturer." In Viet Nam, she learned that the Viet Cong had put a price on her head because of her morale-boosting program and in-person visits.

"When I was in 'Nam, I was going, going, going, giving, giving, putting out energy. I felt I had to be strong for my men. That's how I looked at them." (4) Her dedication is legendary.

#### **AFVN WARTIME CONSTRUCTION CONTINUES**

The first country-wide live remote television broadcast of "The Bob Hope Christmas Show" occurred on December 28, 1969, from Long Binh. In April, AFVN completed the first in-country, city-to-city (Saigon to My Tho to Vinh Long to Can Tho) microwave transmission system. This enabled AFVN to provide television coverage to servicemen in the Mekong Delta.

A 50-watt repeater transmitter began operation on May 22, giving radio service to the Tuy Hoa area. Television studio facilities became operational at Chu Lai on May 17, and at Qui Nhon on May 26. The latter station also gained a video tape replay capability.

AFVN surveyed more than a thousand U.S. servicemen during the summer of 1970. Reflecting a new generation of G.I. tastes and preferences, the network made nine programming changes. They added more "underground" music on AM radio and increased sports coverage during the football season. FM broadcasts extended to twenty-four hours at the Da Nang station on January 9, 1971.

#### **MORE AFRTS STAFFERS KILLED**

All this service didn't come without a price for AFRTS staffers in Vietnam and at the sister Southeast Asian Network in Thailand. On June 8, 1969, three enlisted men from the Saigon station were killed when their Jeep struck a land mine. The AFVN newsmen had been filming the last episode of a six-part series on the activities of military chaplains in 'Nam.

Then, on April 10, 1970, a crippled F-4 Phantom Jet returning from a mission over Vietnam to its base at Udorn, Thailand, crashed into the second floor of the BOQ. It plowed into the Armed Forces Thailand Network station. The support building and van turned into an inferno.

Nine more AFRTS staffers were killed.

Station manager Jack Lynch escaped death because he'd just gone to the hospital to check out a sore elbow. Hearing the crash, he ran outside to see a column of black smoke rising from the direction of the station.

"I went around the corner and there was just nothing there," he recalled. "Through all that smoke and flame, it looked like the crash just destroyed the whole thing. You could see that there was just not much that could be done at that time." Lynch later discovered that the plane had landed "right on top of my desk! The nose was inside the back door and the tail was inside the front door." (7)

Even before the shock wore off, Lynch and his three surviving staffers began efforts to put the station back on the air. With immediate assistance from their headquarters, they began radio broadcasts within thirty hours, using a signal relayed from Korat. They borrowed two mobile homes that Chase Manhattan Bank had sent to Urbon, and began live radio operations within thirty days using equipment sent in from other stations. The station then "jury-rigged" a film-chain-only television setup located in a converted "hootch-type" barracks. It was partially enclosed and air conditioned for the equipment. The temporary facility had no live cameras. Announcers simply read the news over appropriate slides. Meanwhile, efforts went ahead to secure a new television van from existing AFRTS resources. The crash had created an extraordinary crisis.



Yet, the surviving staff at Udorn approached the disaster with exemplary dedication and a single goal in mind. They would put the station back on the air as soon as possible.

#### AFRTS THAILAND

By 1970, the Thailand Network, which operated under the jurisdiction of the Air Force, consisted of six manned radio and TV stations and seventeen radio or television relay facilities. AFTN had manned outlets at the headquarters station at Korat, at Nakhon Phanom, Takhli, Ubon, Udorn and U-Tapao. The unmanned stations at Samaesan and Vayama provided both radio and television by relay from U-Tapao. The other repeater transmitters provided only radio to small groups of American servicemen.

The radio side of the Thailand operation broadcast twenty-four hours a day using virtually the entire AFRTS package except for the programs designed for dependent children. They supplemented this programming with about eight hours of locally-oriented programs. The television stations operated during the week from three O'clock in the afternoon until Midnight and from 10:00 AM to Midnight on weekends. They used the fifty-five hours of programming included in the AFRTS package and added productions from the station libraries, local spots, news and special events programs. This included a "very vigorous command spot program" that the network felt was "one of the most effective methods for getting the command message across." (5)

Each of the manned TV stations in Thailand began operation using a mobile van flown in completely equipped from the United States. The self-contained vans lacked only power and air conditioning. Each station consisted of complete film chain facilities, audio and video control, associated support equipment and a small studio for live newscasts. The network later constructed a support building at each installation with facilities for the radio operations and another television studio. Eventually, the vans became solely transmitting facilities.

The Thai government expressed concern about the intrusion of American culture among its people. So, the network had to carefully engineer the radiated transmissions from both television and radio to insure that the signal would stay within the confines of the installation. Since few Thais had TV sets with UHF, television presented few problems to the network. Radio signals couldn't be so easily contained and on occasion the government gave stern warnings to the American Embassy about the future of AFTN operation in Thailand. (6)

#### VIETNAM DRAWDOWN

Back in Viet Nam, AFVN faced equally trying, if not as tragic, circumstances in trying to maintain a fully-integrated operation as U. S. Forces began their massive withdrawals

during 1971.

Detachment 7, Chu Lai ceased operating on 20 December 1970. Radio and TV program service continued through a transmitter, which repeated the Da Nang signal. As the troops departed, the network shut down more stations beginning with Tuy Hoa in July and Can Tho in September. Through the implementation of an automatic rebroadcast system, AFVN continued to provide radio and television service to the few remaining forces in both locations. The studio equipment from the deactivated outlets went to other AFRTS operations or returned to the Sacramento Army Depot.

As the drawdown continued, the broadcast detachments relocated and reorganized. Troubleshooting maintenance teams visited each unit at its new location to provide technical support and guidance. Downtime and projected equipment outages decreased. The level of logistical support and the broadcast signals remained strong.

During the relocations, nature, not the enemy, caused a major crisis. On October 23, Typhoon Hester knocked Da Nang off the air for several days. It blew down both the FM and TV towers. Nonetheless, the maintenance teams were able to return FM to the air on October 26, TV on the 28th, and AM on October 29.

The network continued to experience cuts in staff and budget during the year. Still, it maintained its production activities. In December, it provided live television coverage of "The Bob Hope Christmas Show" for the third consecutive year. It distributed both tape and film copies to stations throughout Viet Nam and to the Thailand Network. AFVN also produced a special, "1971: G.I. Christmas," which it sent to all outlets.

As station closings continued, the remaining outlets provided wider coverage. By December, 1971, Hue's radio and television broadcasts reached to the DMZ in the north and to the Hai Van Pass in the south. It was the first time a single station in Viet Nam had covered such a wide area.

Because of a growing security problem, Hue went off the air on February 14, 1972. The Qui Nhon Detachment phased down with the troop redeployments. Radio went off the air on February 14 and television on February 22. The Government of South Viet Nam received the station's equipment.

The reduction in the size of AFVN and relocation of stations continued apace with the withdrawal of American Forces. Cam Ranh Bay went off the air on April 30. On June 26, its staff began an outlet at Nha Trang.

#### AFVN'S TENTH ANNIVERSARY

During 1972, the work of AFVN became even more important in helping maintain the morale of the remaining troops. On its tenth anniversary, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird congratulated "all personnel, past and



present, of the American Forces Viet Nam Network as it marks its Tenth Anniversary. The dedicated efforts of these hundreds of skilled men and women are well known and appreciated by all who have served in the Republic of Viet Nam. All command levels recognize their efforts as truly professional. Now, as we continue to decrease American involvement in this area of the world, the work of the American Forces Viet Nam Network is no less important. For those thousands who felt a little closer to home because you were there, I thank you for a job well done."

Yet, the end of AFVN was only a matter of time.

On March 23, 1973, Lieutenant Colonel Felix Casipit sent a telegram from Saigon to AFRTS in Washington. He advised that his unit had shipped all retrogradable equipment from Da Nang, Pleiku, Nha Trang, Can Tho, and Cat Lo. The Government of Viet Nam received any remaining material. The final packing of equipment at the Saigon station neared completion. The retrograde of the TV film chain stopped, pending a decision on MACV's request to retain the facility. Casipit laconically closed his telegram:

"AFVN ceased to be as of 2400 hours 22 March 73."

A group of DoD civilians established an FM automated

operation on March 23, and designated it American Forces Radio Service Viet Nam.

Still, amongst criticisms and controversy, there would be many more plateaus for armed forces broadcasting to reach.

## NOTES - CHAPTER 21

- (1) Sergeant Major Mike Mason, "POW: Anyone Can Be One," *Soldiers*, October 1983.
- (2) *Washington Post*, November 9, 1984, pp F1,4.
- (3) Captain Willis Haas, Jr. to Chief, Armed Forces Radio and Television, Viet Nam, "Project Report," December 30, 1966.
- (4) *Washington Post*, op cit.
- (5) Richard Risk, "AFTN Briefing," late 1970; Interviews with Gary Sumrall, June 13, 1983; Jack Lynch, January 26, 1984.
- (6) AFN briefing.
- (7) Lynch interview.